

Malathi's Teacher Training Experience with David Horsburgh
as told to Taleemnet in Goa, March 2004.

I was very interested in teaching and always wanted to be a teacher but I did not like the idea of being trained to teach. I also did not like mainstream teaching. Soon after I got my M.A. in Kannada literature, I saw a very small advertisement in Deccan Herald "Wanted teachers, but not trained." I could not believe my luck! I applied. It so happened that an English couple, Mrs. and Mr. Starley desired to start a village school and were looking for teachers to take on the job of running it. David was known to them and he offered to "train" the prospective teacher candidates.

There were two applicants but only I turned up for the interview. With little other option they drove down with me deep into the heartland of settlements on the Karnataka-Andhra Pradesh border, which is where David had his small school Neel Bagh near a village called Rayalpad. Having come from mainstream and a "schooled", "conditioned", conventional background, I was expecting to see buildings, classrooms and children. There was nothing there, except a mud hut in the middle of open scrub! In this hut, seated on mats, on a neat cow dung floor were about 20 children aged 5-14. Doreen (David Horsburgh's wife) was teaching craft to the children.

David was not in. He had gone to the village to settle a dispute and attend a marriage. When David arrived, I saw that he was a long haired, well built, *lungi* clad, barefoot Englishman. He sang loudly as he entered. I think it was a habit he developed to forewarn the locals of his arrival and not embarrass anyone with an encounter in an unguarded moment. He was always conscious that people needed to feel at ease as he was not of the community and for this he adapted entirely to local ways of living. Looking back, I think his conscious effort to always take into account the context of the local situation when doing anything was a very endearing quality.

My interview was to 'write all about myself and what I thought about teaching in as much detail as possible'. He said that he wanted to know how good my English was. I immediately retaliated saying: "You cannot come to India and expect a high standard of

English from a student of Kannada literature that too someone opting to teach in a tribal village, cut off from the rest of the world. It will not be fair to reject me on the basis of my lack of competence in English”.

So David gave in gracefully and smiled.

I think the exercise of writing that David put me through was a crucial one in my life. The introspection helped to clarify my reasons for opting to join David and strengthened my choice of career. At the time, I was very apprehensive, my older sister had accompanied me and she did not look encouraging at all.

David was charismatic, very confident of his ability to get people to do things that he had in mind for them. Just before leaving, I noticed he had marked a part of the area nearby with chalk. He pointed to it and said, “When you come here on Monday, I will have a house ready for you here to stay.” It was a Friday and he expected me to join on Monday!

But, come Monday, I and three more teacher trainee candidates did arrive. We saw a beautiful cottage, with a thatched roof. The front door was decorated with mango *torana*, the entrance with *rangoli*. Someone had even worked a design into the cow dung floor. The hut was built to house four. Each of us had a corner space to ourselves, a lamp, a desk, and a bamboo cot. Also, there was a small cooking space and a library room within, with a table for each of us. David had built it over the week-end. I realized that this was some man here.

David started training teachers in 1975. I was one of them. The purpose of the training was to prepare individuals with the right skills who in turn would start their own small schools in villages.

To train teachers, he needed a school with children: Neel Bagh! It was a small, beautiful school. Small in terms of the structures and number of children, Beautiful, because the buildings were of mud and tiles, in harmony with the natural surroundings. David Horsburgh started “Neel Bagh” in 1972. He had done it very simply. Returning from the village one day, he announced to his wife; “I have started a school, it has two pupils as of

now". No doubt a lot of planning, preparation and thinking had preceded this seemingly casual remark.

Our in-depth training was for a year. It was very rigorous. David started from scratch, slowly and carefully going through each aspect: curriculum, methodology, learning aids documentation, reflection, assessment, arts, crafts, drama, music, construction. In that one year we not only became competent to start a school but also confident about ourselves. We were called to share tea with him by turns. These were very special times when he would speak on a one to one basis and our respect, awe and bonding with him grew every time. At the end he was not only our mentor and Guru but became our friend and father.

Vikasana is the result of my teacher training experience with David.